

# Administration Divided Over Somalia Staff

## *Safety of Diplomats Would Be in Doubt*

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With U.S. forces counting down to a March 31 withdrawal from Somalia, the Clinton administration is divided over whether to leave a small diplomatic contingent behind in Mogadishu, whose safety Marine Corps officers say they cannot guarantee.

The controversial proposal to keep diplomats there, approved last month by a senior interagency group, comes amid extraordinary efforts to prevent further casualties as the 14-month-old humanitarian intervention winds down.

U.S. commanders are so preoccupied with security that they have banned Americans from most Somali roads and are transporting them out of the country on a leased Greek cruise ship, the Mediterranean Sky, for fear that transport aircraft would be shot down.

A Marine survey team concluded after traveling to Somalia last month that "violence will rapidly escalate" with the departure of U.S. forces and that a platoon of 50 troops cannot ensure the safety of a diplomatic outpost there.

Maj. Michael T. Edwards, oper-  
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# Proposal to Keep Diplomats in Mogadishu Raises Concerns About Security

## WITHDRAWAL, From A1

ations officer for the Marine battalion that protects State Department posts around the world, wrote in a Jan. 2 memorandum to Ambassador Richard Bogosian that his security platoon's "capability is not sufficient for continuing operations past 31 March."

He predicted that Bogosian would require emergency evacuation from Mogadishu within 30 to 60 days if he remained.

Although considered alarmist by some military and civilian leaders, the Edwards memorandum has received Cabinet-level attention from an administration grown highly sensitive to the anxieties of military officers in the field. In Mogadishu last fall, the U.S. commander asked for tanks to protect his troops. Then-Defense Secretary Les Aspin's rejection of that request was blamed for some of the heavy casualties suffered by an Army Ranger task force the following month.

Weighed against the safety risks are strong political and policy motives to leave a diplomatic team in place in the Somali capital. State Department officials argue that they would have a valuable role in helping broker a reconciliation

among Somalia's warring clans. Other officials say that "bailing out" would make a mockery of President Clinton's claims that the United States is leaving Somalia because its work in restoring security is largely done.

"The least you can do is leave a liaison office to demonstrate that the level of anarchy has come down somewhat," said an Army officer with close contacts among the decision makers. "If you can't even leave a liaison office then clearly the situation is no better than, and possibly worse than, when you arrived."

All participants in the debate agree that with only a platoon of troops, even the highly trained Marines of the Navy's Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team "could be rolled over as quickly as [warlord Mohamed Farah] Aidede or other clans would want to do so." One senior civilian said the real message of the Edwards memo was, " 'Hey guys, don't think by sticking me in here you've got real security.' "

The disagreement is over the likelihood of a major threat and the ability of remaining United Nations troops to protect against it. Those discounting the threat note that the United States has recently agreed to provide heavy weapons—tanks,

**U.S. soldiers line up at airport in Mogadishu to board plane bound for Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. The humanitarian mission is to end March 31.**

Cobra helicopter gunships and armored troop carriers—to the contingents, from Third World countries, scheduled to remain in the 20,000-strong U.N. force, and that Aidede is disinclined, at least for now, to pick a fight with Washington.

"I've driven from the U.S. Embassy compound to Aidede's place with nothing but his bodyguards and felt completely safe, and I've driven down that street with a couple of

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armored Humvees, everybody with guns, and not felt safe," said Marine Maj. Gen. Tony Zinni, the military adviser to U.S. special representative Robert B. Oakley. "To me it all depends on the arrangements you have with Aidede, and I wouldn't see that Aidede is going to do something against [the U.S. mission] that you wouldn't know is coming."

At a White House meeting on Jan. 12, the "deputies committee" of

top lieutenants to the national security cabinet agreed to leave about 25 diplomats and 50 combat Marines in Mogadishu's U.N. compound, according to officials with firsthand knowledge. With the assent of William J. Perry, Aspin's successor, the Cabinet-level "principals group" appears ready to follow suit.

Under questioning at a hearing last week by Sen. Dirk Kempthorne (R-Idaho), Perry promised that the arrangement "will have my very close attention in the weeks to come" and said he would not "sign up to a solution which I think puts our Marines in a situation where they are needlessly endangered."

A senior policymaker at the Pentagon, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that "there are people who are very pessimistic" about the security of the mission. He said a final decision has not been made, adding, "If it turns out that it is—and I'm not saying that it is—the considered judgment of

Centcom [Central Command] or [the State Department's office of] diplomatic security or Marine officers in charge of the security force battalion that it is unacceptably dangerous, that would obviously be taken into account when the decision is made."

In the diplomatic mission in Mogadishu—known as a U.S. Liaison Office because Somalia has no government to accredit an embassy—a gallows humor prevails. According to officers and civilians interviewed by telephone from Washington, there are nervous references to a "Saigon scenario" and jokes about arriving early for a seat on the last helicopter.

A State Department official, discounting the likelihood of a major attack on the post, said the Marines would have to worry mainly about "background noise."

"Of course," he added, "what passes for background noise there would be regarded as alarmingly violent in a lot of other places."